



RANTS & RAVES

Mel Croucher has an interesting business proposition for Gordon Brown, while **Simon Edwards** discovers the depressing truth about humankind in his bulging email inbox – still, at least he hasn't joined the zombie ranks

BULLET PROOF

Mel Croucher **RANTS**

During China's Cultural Revolution, people due to be shot by firing squad had to pay in advance for the bullet used to shoot them. In my opinion, what is happening under Britain's Cultural Revolution is much less logical.

I run a website at www.uncle-ernie.co.uk. It sells unique data compiled by the leading authority in the art of beating the bookies. There's a modest charge of £25 to download this data, and punters have been satisfied with this arrangement

for the past 37 racing seasons. Can you imagine my response if one of my customers insisted that instead of

I'll do you a package deal. You pay me £93 each time you want to access my personal data, which is my copyright and which I own

them paying me to access my unique data, I had to pay them? Now imagine this customer passed a law whereby they could fine me £2,500 if I refused to agree to their loony demands. This is like paying for the bullet that's about to shoot me, and it is exactly what is proposed under the legislation

for biometric ID cards. This is not my usual rant about the fact that I'm prepared to be thrown in jail rather

than submit to a surveillance society. This is about money.

PAY FOR THE NOSE

Gordon Brown's promise that ID cards will be self-funding means I will have to pay at least £93 to have my personal data encoded on a piece of

plastic. But who owns data about me? I do. If my data is useful to any third party, then I can understand and accept that fact. If it is vital that a third party needs to access my data, then so much the better. Pay me. That's right, I don't pay you, you pay me. You want to know my National Insurance number? What's it worth to you? You need to check out my credit rating, my blood group, my driving endorsements, my academic files, what I buy at Boots, the exact dates I've entered and exited various countries or women? You want this information that I own? Then you can damn well buy it from me. Furthermore, if you want to store it on a database and use it for your own purposes, I will license you my data when you pay me a royalty.

Here is my biometric rate card. My fingerprints cost a tenner each. My iris patterns are 20 quid the pair. My photographic likeness, that's worth 50 quid at least. I'll tell you what, I'll do you a package deal. You pay me £93 each time you want to access this personal data, which is my copyright and which I own. Of course you must guarantee not to sell my data on, abuse it, misuse it or lose it. Otherwise



I will be able to fine you £2,500 or put you in jail for non-compliance.

On second thoughts, pay me for a bullet and I'll blow your head off.

TESTING TIMES

Simon Edwards **RANTS**

Do you want pills to make you bigger, harder, sleepier, more awake, happier, calmer, in less pain? Perhaps you want to lose inches from your waistline, gain inches on other body parts, have increased fertility, an increased sex drive, a happier wife, a secret affair with someone who isn't your wife or easier access to pornography?

All these things and many, many more are available to you, one mouse click away and for just a few dollars. A quick look at your email box will confirm this. What are you waiting for? It's what you want.

And the sad thing is that many of us do want at least one of these things. Spammers know it, which is why they sell, or claim to sell, these products and dreams. Someone, somewhere is buying this stuff. It

might be only a small percentage of the people who receive spam emails, but billions of those messages are sent out every day, and thousands of customers are shelling out.

DESPERATE MEASURES

When we tested anti-spam software this month we went through hundreds upon hundreds of spam messages, and it's only when you're faced with scrolling lists of concentrated spam subject headers that you realise what a desperate species we are. Seeing those messages illustrates the most basic of human needs, and also our human failings. Spam is a mirror on the human condition.

First of all, spam tells us that we are lazy and stupid. Why else would we fall for offers of a diploma where zero work is required? Or the idea that there are legions of hot teens dying to get to know us? Not only that, we're also sexually frustrated. Naturally I'm talking generally here, not about me or you. No way.

An email entitled 'More sexual confidence' is clearly targeting someone who is, at least, slightly vulnerable. Another with the subject

and, therefore, gazing into the void of human discontent.

But then, just as I was finishing off this piece, I received an email from Homer Lynn (bhaeqm@fadmail.com), who was clearly at the back of the queue when email addresses were being given out. He was offering me an antidote that will strengthen the immune system, offering an implied protection to those in desperate situations, affected by HIV, AIDS, cancer or SARS. Rant? I despair.

MOBILE ZOMBIES

Simon Edwards **RANTS**

West London, summer 2005. It's a sunny morning, still early, and the birds are singing unusually loudly. The sound of traffic is strangely missing. A gust of wind blows a dusty cloud of grit and leaves across a badly kept pavement. So poorly maintained is the paving that, in some places, grass has forced its way through the solid

When someone plugs their ears with an iPod and glues their eyes to a Nokia every second they're in public, it's like sending the world to Coventry

line 'Make your wife happy' will surely attract every optimistic married man in the world. But if there truly were a generic solution to making wives happy you can be damn sure we'd have heard about it before now, and not via an email from bloody bradowe63@ikb.nlh.no.

It's not all dark and depressing, though. At least, not for you. Statistically speaking, *Shopper* readers are smart, probably married and have a few kids thoroughly draining their resources. This means that you clever people are not going to be fooled into buying any dodgy drugs or porn and, more importantly, neither can you afford to. You probably don't know many Brads, Joaquins or Duanes, so all those emails they send you can be ignored straight off. Invitations to 'Click Here For Your Free Cruise Tickets' are not going to send you, frothing at the mouth, into a frenzy of excitement.

So we'll just leave the rest of the world to exploit each other while we get on with emailing our families, booking holidays online and having a generally wholesome time on the internet. Fortunately I'm now recovering from a nasty month spent testing anti-spam software

concrete. It doesn't take nature long to reclaim its place in a neglected city. Not when we stop paying attention.

As I stand next to an overflowing rubbish bin, an uneasy feeling causes me to turn my head. Behind me, from around a corner, lurches a shabbily dressed man. His face is covered in a week's growth of beard, his shoes are grimy from walking the streets. He stumbles into a lamp post, curses and changes direction, never redirecting his staring, blank eyes from something in his clenched fist. Narrowly missing an abandoned car, he meanders through an archway and is gone.

I move on uneasily, but my route is blocked. I face a line of three people, shoulder to shoulder, their backs to me. They are shuffling forward slowly, eerily. Pushing through, I hear no protest. I look back. These ordinarily dressed commuters are staring at their hands. Some have cables coming out of their heads. They are oblivious to me and their general surroundings.

This is not a scene from some dodgy 1970s science fiction or zombie movie. Alien plant life has not gone on a blinding rampage, turning the population of our capital city into a sightless, helpless, starving mass. It's not even a William Shatner-era

episode of *Star Trek*, although you'd be forgiven for thinking so. This is the daily commute to work for hundreds of people.

WE'RE ALL DOOMED

There are legions of folk who blunder blindly through the streets of London, crashing into buildings, cars and each other. Their senses are entirely occupied with things that have nothing to do with their environment. The new portable games consoles, such as Sony's PlayStation Portable (PSP), will not improve this situation. Sooner or later someone will become too immersed in a game of Doom and start lashing out at fellow pedestrians.

The selfishness of it all is astonishing. I know we don't all walk around wishing each other a good morning these days, and if anyone stopped me to comment on the weather we've been having I'd probably reach for the pepper spray. But when someone plugs their ears with an iPod and glues their eyes to a Nokia for every second they spend in public, it's like sending the world to Coventry. It also means that these people become a moving obstacle at best, and usually a liability to others.

For those of us who walk unfettered by portable virtual reality devices, there are moments of entertainment to be witnessed and cherished. Just pick out a mobile phone zombie in a crowd and watch for a while. It's hilarious.

Here's a true story. Recently, outside London St Pancras station, a smartly dressed young woman flipped open her phone and shut out the world. She strode down the pavement, drawing admiring looks from the men around her. Not that she noticed.

Eyes firmly affixed to the phone's screen, she stepped into the road, where a cyclist shot right in front of her, knocking the phone out of her hand. It flew through the air, smashed on to the road and broke in two.

Lobotomised by her loss, the woman stared blankly at her demolished device, while the cyclist rained well-deserved abuse on her head. I doubt she realised she was six inches from serious injury, if not death. If only someone had captured the moment using one of those clever new video phones. But they will have been too busy texting, chatting or getting squashed by buses to notice. **CS**

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